



University of Iowa

---

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

---

10-20-2006

## Writing With (and Against) National Identity

Mimi Khalvati

Panel: Writing With (and Against) National Identity

---

### Rights

Copyright © 2006 Mimi Khalvati

### Recommended Citation

Khalvati, Mimi, "Writing With (and Against) National Identity" (2006). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 710.

[https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp\\_archive/710](https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/710)

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

**Mimi Khalvati (Iran/England)**

### **Writing With (and Against) National Identity**

Asking questions seems to me the more generous side of discourse—more generous than giving answers, or trying to. This holds true in everyday conversations and, in the generosity we have been shown since we arrived in the States, in the number of questions we have been asked (and I don't mean by immigration officials). Asking questions allows the other to inhabit the open space, to take the stage, and to identify themselves if they so wish. Of course the most frequent, and frequently opening, question asked of us has been 'Where do you come from?' And the most frequent way in which we have introduced ourselves has been 'My name is ....' and 'I come from ...' This little preposition '*from*' sets the stage and, to a large extent, determines the script.

Our sense of national identity is constructed both from without and from within. You might think that for a writer whatever comes from within herself would be the stronger determinant. But my experience has been that the way in which I have been seen and identified from the outside has also strongly affected me, both in what I write and the way I write it, and has embroiled me in a constantly shifting argument. As a poet in Britain, being seen as an Iranian—on one occasion, as a 'Persian poetess'—has engaged me in as protracted, if less dangerous, a negotiation as my government has embarked on with the UN. As a British national, I am not even sure whether saying 'my government' means Blair and his croneys or Ahmadinejad and his clerics.

To clarify the confusion, perhaps, a few biographical details would help. I was born in Iran, too long ago to give the date, and sent to England when I was six years old for a 'good English education'—in the days when it *was* good and it's nice to think it was within my lifetime. Sending your kids abroad was of course a fairly customary practice among Iranians, whose eyes had been turned towards the West and away from their own extraordinary culture (something the revolution would change, though not in the way we hoped for). In my boarding school there were many other Iranian girls, but only one my age. Her name was Homa, and the two of us were known as 'our two Persian pussies.' That was in the days when Persia meant carpets, cats, and not a lot else. My family stayed behind in Tehran and very soon I forgot how to speak Persian, forgot my family, and how to pronounce my own name. But I learnt the Queen's English and later, like many people whose countries are lost to them, learnt to call this language my home.

I returned to live in Iran for two periods in the seventies and my daughter was born there. I learnt how to speak Farsi again—but not to read and write—and I was again in the heart of family, living the childhood I had lost. This is where my sense of being Iranian is located—in my grandmother's house, being an adult but feeling like a child, in sense memories of sunlight and the seasons, the rituals of the house, and in my overwhelming sense of being loved. This is also where my poetry comes from.

I started writing late, in my forties, in the late eighties, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and much of my early work, centred on themes of family, women, motherhood,

came out of a wish to say ‘No, we’re not like that’, much as I hear Americans now say, ‘No, we’re not all like that, this is how we really are.’ In the same spirit of redress, my first pamphlet was called *Persian Miniatures*—a choice I later came to regret. Regret isn’t particularly productive, but it can, hopefully, lead to being ‘wised up’. It took me a long time to wise up to how I was seen from without.

Chance remarks pointed the way: elderly ladies, after poetry readings, complimenting me, not as I hoped, on my poetry, but on my English; anthologists of contemporary British poetry apologizing for my exclusion on the grounds that “we already have an Asian writer;” critics who apparently discerned in my extended syntax something to do with Persian grammar; others who couldn’t review me because they had no Persian literary referents. This is unabashedly a list of gripes. But more importantly, it led me to ask the question, and I am aware of it every time I take up my pen: who owns the language? And I reply, I do, everyone who loves it, writes in it, seeks to enrich it, and humbles herself before it, does.

I was asked yesterday by one of our writers here at the IWP if I thought anyone could be *totally* uprooted from their culture. I held my hand out and said, looking at its brownness, the darker brown wrinkles, the pale flat nails: ‘This is an Iranian hand. It’s not an English hand.’ We can’t be uprooted from our skin, our physiognomy, our ancestry, our DNA. Our bodies are the bottom line, so no, I don’t think it’s possible, it’s impossible, I said.

And yet, I write in English, for an English-speaking and primarily British audience. I would like to be part of the British mainstream from which, I would hope, I might speak to a more international audience. And I write within the English lyric tradition. I have met the lyric on its own grounds and it has met me on mine: it is a locus outside the bounds of national identity, outside those of biography and even those of memory. It asks for no facts, no identifying marks, no social, historical, political context. It asks me only to exist in the present moment—to see the river only in its present light, the shadows moving only at their present speed, the geese standing still, the riverbirds whose name I have not yet—are they moorhens?—learnt. The lyric forgives me for my limitations.

Some of the most exciting writing in English is emanating from those whose origins were elsewhere. I have heard Kazuo Ishiguro complain that he does not wish to be boxed in by his national identity; I have heard E.A. Markham rant against the racial stereotyping he has suffered for years, despite having fought it on platform after platform. But even if your subject matter is quintessentially English, if you write not in dialect but in a literary idiom, even if you don’t conform to stereotypes, they are foisted on you, you are read and misread through their lens. None of us wants to inhabit an ethnic ghetto. We resent sharing beds with strange bedfellows—anthologies and readings that throw us all into the same pot in a big brown brew. It is one thing here to be part of a unique international community. It is another to be termed, as the Arts Council of England has now re-termed us, BME, that is to say, Black and Minority Ethnic, in a further attempt to name the ‘other.’

Poetry, among the literary arts, is itself marginal. Poets have traditionally been seen as writing from the margins, from the liminal threshold, the wavering border between self and world. As an Iranian writer, I have often wilted under readers' expectations: I should write about the revolution, the Islamic regime, Islam itself; as a woman writer, I should write about arranged marriages, women wearing the veil. I am reluctant to use my personal history as an apology for failing to bear witness in ways the public expects. Had I been born elsewhere, had I lived another life, I like to think I would still assert my right to embrace poetry, not as an antagonistic or polemical forum, but as an empty home, whose rooms I may fill with voices, echoes, whose colours rhyme backgrounds and accents, whose rhythms take their measure from the inner ear. Here, self can be selfless, can disappear. Wordsworth can walk and talk with Hafez. All that is fractured can be fused, all that is fused, fragmented, and each small fragment small enough to sit, surrounded by borders, deep and wide on all four sides, on a page.

At the moment, I'm working on a book of short poems, some linked into sequences, which I call *The Meanest Flower*, taking my title from Wordsworth. Because I am writing flower poems, I'm laying myself open to charges of exoticism, hot-house femininity, quietism. Because I am writing ghazals, I'm estranging myself. Because I am Iranian, my aesthetic sensibilities veer towards the delicate, the lyric yearning for union. Because I am British and bolshy, I refuse to conform to literary fashion. But let the sonnet lie side by side with the ghazal - strange bedfellows that have more in common than they imagine.

Since we have been here at the IWP, sitting as one large group in the board room of the UBC, straggling across the river, breakfasting in twos and threes or alone, we have formed many fluctuating groups—sometimes gravitating towards those from our part of the world, sometimes pairing up, like Wordsworth and Hafez, in unlikely combinations. Whatever the number or the constellation, in as many varieties of English as there are nationalities here, we exchange differences and likenesses in a common currency: that of enjoyment, fascination, and an eagerness to learn. It will soon get cold and as it does, and I swap salads for soups, when I lift the spoon to my mouth, I shall remember Choi, telling me that in Korea they must eat hot soup every day. “For health?” I ask. “No, for custom,” she says.